

# Donovan: Praised by JFK and Castro

By MILT FREUDENHEIM

Miami Herald-Chicago News Wire

NEW YORK — Cuban Premier Fidel Castro recently told attorney James B. Donovan that the ambassador of Communist Romania had been asking about him.

"I told him you were a very unusual man, unique in my experience," Castro related. "I told him you might have become a great revolutionary, except for one quality—you have too good a sense of humor!"

The man who negotiated the release of more than 3,500 Americans from Fidel Castro's Cuba, laughed heartily, then told an anecdote only a man with a sense of humor would tell.

It happened in February, 1962. Donovan had just returned from Berlin where he officiated at the exchange of Soviet master spy Rudolph Abel for American U-2 pilot Gary Powers and another American held by the Communists in East Berlin.

Newsman, foreign correspondents, television cameramen by the hundreds had been swarming through Donovan's 15-room duplex apartment overlooking Prospect Park in Brooklyn.

Mrs. Donovan and their four children had survived this with outward calm. Then on Feb. 20 her husband came into the dining room and found her reading a newspaper. She looked up and pointed to a huge headline that said, "Glenn in Orbit," reporting on astronaut John Glenn.

"Why don't you do something like that?" inquired Mary McKenna Donovan, "You never do a darn thing!"

Perhaps spurred by this crack, the ebullient white-haired Donovan went on to conduct some of the strangest negotiations in U.S. history. As a side operation, he conducted a losing campaign for the U.S. Senate of a character unprecedented in the annals of New York State: He was absent negotiating for prisoners most of the campaign.

Now 47, he has 30 American prisoners still to bring back from Cuba, and hundreds of requests for help in releasing prisoners in other parts of the world.

"Word has gotten around," he says, "that I specialize in releasing people from bondage."



James Donovan  
... negotiator

It is a dangerous specialty. Fanatical anti-Castro Cubans in the U.S. have threatened his life. They consider the prisoner release a setback to their dream of U.S. invasion of Cuba.

In Havana, Castro provides Donovan with "my private army" of bodyguards to bar fanatics on the other side who also abhor any step that might improve Cuba-U.S. relations.

However Castro's guards did not prevent Donovan from receiving delivery in Havana of a clandestine gift—a humidor full of cigars bearing the emblem of the Bay of Pigs invasion brigade and Donovan's name on the cover.

The anti-Communist underground had sent it.

Donovan, who had been wearing a sling because of bursitis in his shoulder, smuggled the souvenir out of Cuba inside the sling.

In his downtown Manhattan office overlooking the East River, Brooklyn and New York Harbor, he proudly displays another memento, a gift from spy Abel, whom he defended by order of a U.S. court for four years before arranging the Abel-Powers prisoner swap.

It is a 17th century edition of commentaries on the legal code of Roman Emperor Justinian. Knowing Donovan collects old books, Abel sent back the rare item through Checkpoint Charlie in the Berlin Wall after his release.

Removing a slip of paper pasted inside the cover, bibliophile Donovan found a bookplate showing a former owner was the exceedingly un-Marxist Royal Library of Saxony.

This week another ship

left New York carrying more medicines and baby food promised Castro in the prisoner "ransom" deal. About half of the promised total has reached Cuba.

The value to Castro is \$53,000,000. But American companies provided the drugs and baby food at an actual cost of less than \$23,000,000. Some companies even came out ahead after tax deductions. They have announced gifts of the "profit" to charities.

Donovan, whose law firm is one of the nation's leading insurance corporation attorneys, has donated endless hours of his own valuable time.

Recently he spent all of a Friday in a Brooklyn courthouse where a battle for control of a company with \$12,000,000 assets is raging. Then he took a jet to Miami and registered under an assumed name in a hotel for a night's sleep.

Telephoning Cuba, he arranged clearance for a small Pan American plane to fly him to Havana where he spent the better part of Saturday negotiating with Castro and

aides. Returning to New York via Miami Sunday night, he was back at the courthouse Monday morning.

Said a judge who has an inkling of Donovan's busy life: "What's new? What have you been doing lately?"

Deadly serious business for the thousands of individuals involved and their families, Donovan's work recently took him to the notorious Isle of Pines prison where he was able to arrange cigaret and coffee privileges for 17 Americans held as "counter-revolutionary agents."

"You have been in more danger than the prisoners," Castro once informed Donovan. "By now," the quick-spoken lawyer replied, "You could put me in any prison in Cuba and I would feel at home."

Donovan probably is the

only American to have been commended both by Castro and by the President of the U. S. For Brooklyn College ceremonies, President Kennedy wired congratulations "paying tribute to the public service of James Donovan . . . particularly the role he has performed in recent months in the difficult negotiations in Cuba."

A healthy-appearing golf enthusiast, who hasn't had

time for a vacation at his 10-room Lake Placid cottage in two years, the pink-faced, 5 foot 8 inch Donovan foresees no early end to his labors. "I've got a bear by the tail, and I can't let go," he says.

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